

## Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PANAMA 04898

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PINT, PN  
SUBJECT: PANAMANIAN POLITICS: THE POST-TREATY SCENE

SUMMARY: A NUMBER OF NEW ELEMENTS HAVE CLOUDED THE  
PICTURE OF THE PANAMANIAN POWER STRUCTURE. THE NEW  
PROMINENCE OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES (PARTICULARLY THE  
PANAMENISTAS -- WITH THEIR AGED PALADIN, ARNULFO ARIAS,  
FRESHLY BACK FROM EXILE) GIVES TORRIJOS A TYPE OF  
CHALLENGE HE HAS NOT FACED BEFORE. GREATER FREEDOM OF  
EXPRESSION STRENGTHENS THE PARTIES' CHALLENGE. AT THE  
SAME TIME, THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IS IN CRISIS AS A  
RESULT OF THE POLITICAL-FEUD KILLING OF TWO STUDENTS.  
WHETHER THAT WILL WEAKEN OR STRENGTHEN TORRIJOS VIS-A-VIS  
THE ULTRA-LEFT STUDENTS REMAINS TO BE SEEN. TORRIJOS  
FACES YET ANOTHER CHALLENGE -- GETTING ALONG WITH THE  
U.S. IN THE CONTEXT OF A PARTNERSHIP IN THE CANAL  
OPERATION. IT IS AS THOUGH, AFTER 75 YEARS IN THE  
OPPOSITION, PANAMA HAS BEEN BROUGHT INTO A RULING  
COALITION FOR CANAL OPERATION. DESPITE THESE NEW  
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QUESTION MARKS, WE BELIEVE THAT TORRIJOS' POSITION  
REMAINS STRONG. THE NATIONAL GUARD STILL APPEARS TO  
BACK HIM SOLIDLY, AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM GIVES THE  
OPPOSITION FEW TOOLS TO GET AT AN ENTRENCHED GOVERNMENT.  
EVEN SO, THERE ARE OBVIOUSLY GOING TO BE TRYING TIMES  
AHEAD. TO GET THE TREATY, TORRIJOS HAS ALLOWED A FREER  
COUNTRY. HE MUST LEARN TO LIVE WITH THAT FREEDOM --

AND THE IMPLICATION THAT, IN A FREE SYSTEM, HE WILL PROBABLY BE ULTIMATELY DISPLACED. IF HE CANNOT DO THAT, HE MUST RESORT, TO SOME EXTENT AT LEAST, TO REPRESSION. WHAT COURSE HE TAKES WILL OBVIOUSLY HAVE A GREAT IMPACT ON U.S.-PANAMANIAN RELATIONS. END SUMMARY.

1. DURING THE TREATY DEBATE IN PANAMA, ANTI-TORRIJOS TYPES LIKED TO SAY THAT THE TREATIES WOULD RID PANAMA OF THE GRINGOS IN PERPETUITY AND GIVE IT INSTEAD TORRIJOS IN PERPETUITY. THEY CLAIMED THAT THE TREATIES WOULD MAKE TORRIJOS SUCH A HERO THAT HE WOULD BE POLITICALLY UNASSAILABLE.

2. NOW THAT THE TREATIES ARE IN PLACE, HOWEVER, THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT TORRIJOS IS POLITICALLY IN ANY BETTER SHAPE THAN HE WAS A YEAR AGO. (HE IS, OF COURSE, MANIFESTLY BETTER OFF THAN HE WOULD BE IF THE TREATIES HAD UNEQUIVOCALLY FAILED.) THE LOCAL POLITICAL SCENE IS NOW MORE CONFUSED THAN IT HAS BEEN SINCE TORRIJOS CONSOLIDATED HIS POWER EARLY IN THE DECADE.

3. THIS CONFUSION RESULTS FROM A VARIETY OF NEW FACTORS IN THE EQUATION. THE MOST NOTABLE OF THESE NEW ELEMENTS IS IN THE REVIVAL OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES. THE PROCESS OF TREATY APPROVAL IN BOTH THE U.S. AND PANAMA CRYSTALLIZED AND GAVE A VOICE TO A POLITICAL CURRENT WHICH IS IMPLACABLY OPPOSED TO THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT. CONFIDENTIAL

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IT QUESTIONS THE LEGITIMACY OF TORRIJOS' POLITICAL SYSTEM AND CALLS FOR A "RETURN TO DEMOCRACY". THIS ELEMENT IS LED BY PANAMA'S TWO LARGE PARTIES -- THE PANAMENISTAS AND THE LIBERALS. BUT IT ALSO INCLUDES MANY OTHER SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS. THE SMALL PARTIES -- SUCH AS THE REPUBLICANS, THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS, THE "TERCERISTAS" AND ABOVE ALL THE NEW DEMOCRATIC INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT (NEE INDEPENDENT LAWYERS MOVEMENT) -- ALSO HAVE THEIR FOLLOWINGS. THEY ARE MORE IMPORTANT AS CELLS OF POLITICAL MILITANCY THAN AS POTENTIAL MASS PARTIES. IN ADDITION, THERE ARE A GOOD MANY POLITICALLY ACTIVE INDIVIDUALS, SUCH AS AQUILINO BOYD AND A FEW BOLD RADIO JOURNALISTS, WHO ARE NOT IN THE PARTIES.

4. BY FAR THE BIGGEST WILD CARD THROWN INTO THE DECK BY THE PARTIES IS ARNULFO ARIAS. NO ONE KNOWS THE MEANING OF HIS RETURN TO PANAMA AFTER A TEN-YEAR EXILE, BUT EVERYONE WONDERS. THE CROWD HE DREW ON THE DAY OF HIS RETURN WAS IMPRESSIVE; BUT IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW HE CAN EFFECTIVELY CAPITALIZE ON HIS POPULARITY. WITH ARNULFO AND TORRIJOS IN THE COUNTRY, PANAMA PROBABLY HAS ON THE SCENE THE TWO MOST EFFECTIVE POLITICIANS IN THE COUNTRY'S HISTORY. BUT A REAL TEST OF STRENGTH BETWEEN THEM DOES

NOT SEEM LIKELY, SINCE THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS HEAVILY WEIGHTED IN FAVOR OF THE GOVERNMENT; AND THE NATIONAL GUARD, THE COUNTRY'S OTHER TRADITIONAL POLITICAL ARENA, APPEARS AS STRONGLY ANTI-ARIAS AS IT IS SUPPORTIVE OF TORRIJOS. FURTHERMORE, ARIAS' PANAMENISTAS, LIKE THE OTHER PARTIES, ARE HAMPERED BY MONETARY AND OTHER RESOURCES, WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS IN MUCH GREATER ABUNDANCE.

5. ARIAS AND HIS LIEUTENANTS ADMIT THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE ANY MASTER PLAN FOR BRINGING TORRIJOS DOWN. ARIAS IS MEETING WITH HIS SUPPORTERS AROUND THE COUNTRY, AND THE PARTY IS ORGANIZING. BUT ORGANIZING FOR WHAT? THEY ARE

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FLYING BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS, HOPING THAT TORRIJOS WILL STUMBLE OR THAT SOME UNFORESEEN DEVELOPMENT WILL BOUNCE THEM INTO OFFICE -- OR AT LEAST BOUN CE THE HATED TORRIJOS OUT.

6. TORRIJOS IS DOING SOME FENCE-MENDING OF HIS OWN. HE HAS BEGUN A SERIES OF TRIPS INTO THE INTERIOR, WHERE HE HOBNOBS WITH HIS PEOPLE. AS FAR AS WE KNOW, HE HAS NO CONCERNS ABOUT THE LOYALTY OF THE NATIONAL GUARD.

7. THE LIBERALS HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO TAKE MUCH ADVANTAGE OF THEIR UNACCUSTOMED FREEDOM OF ACTION. THEY WANT A RETURN TO MORE DEMOCRATIC FORMS, BUT MOST OF THEM WOULD AGREE TO TORRIJOS' CONTINUATION IN POWER FOR A WHILE LONGER, AS A TRANSITION TO A TRADITIONAL PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE IS A SPLIT OVER TACTICS. DURING THE PLEBISCITE DEBATE THE LIBERALS MADE OVERTURES TO THE GOVERNMENT IN FAVOR OF A RETURN TO DEMOCRACY. AFTER SOME SOUL-SEARCHING THE PARTY WENT ON RECORD AS FAVORING THE TREATIES. BUT THEY NEVER GOT MUCH SATISFACTION OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT, EXCEPT FOR A FEW

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EMBARRASSING PUBLIC EMBRACES FROM THE LIKES OF ROMULO ESCOBAR BETHANCOURT. TORRIJOS INCREASINGLY SPEAKS OF LEGALIZING PARTIES, STRENGTHENING THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH AND POSSIBLE DIRECT ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT IN 1984, BUT HE ALSO DEFENDS HIS SUI GENERIS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. (SEE SEPTEL ON TORRIJOS' JULY 5 SPEECH IN COLON.) THE POLICY OF STRIKING A DEAL WITH THE GOVERNMENT HAVING PRODUCED LIMITED RESULTS SO FAR, MANY LIBERALS HAVE BEEN ARGUING IN FAVOR OF A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE WITH THE PANAMENISTAS. THIS HAS RUN INTO SEVERAL OBSTACLES AMONG LIBERALS. IN THE FIRST PLACE, MANY OF THEM STRONGLY MISTRUST ARNULFO. SECOND, THEY FEAR THEY WOULD BE BURNING THEIR BRIDGES TO THE GOVERNMENT, IF THEY ALIGNED THEMSELVES WITH ARIAS. AND THEY WOULD BE WILLING TO DO THAT ONLY IF THE ARIAS BANDWAGON SEEMED TO BE GOING SOMEWHERE. TORRIJOS' RECENT DECLARATION IN COLON, SEEMING TO PROMISE DEMOCRATIC REFORMS, WILL UNDOUBTEDLY STRENGTHEN LIBERAL LEADERS WHO HOPE FOR CHANGE THROUGH COOPERATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT. IN SUM, WHILE THE PANAMENISTAS ARE FLYING OFF IN ALL DIRECTIONS AND HOPING FOR THE BEST, THE LIBERALS ARE SITTING ON THE DIME AND LIKEWISE HOPING FOR THE BEST.

8. A SECOND ELEMENT OF CHANGE -- GREATER FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION -- HAS STRENGTHENED THE PARTIES. THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAYS OF CONTROLLING THE PRESS, PUBLIC ASSEMBLY, ETC., AND IT USES THEM. BUT THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT THERE IS MUCH GREATER FREEDOM THAN THERE WAS A YEAR AGO. PANAMANIAN HAVE TASTED THE RIGHT TO DISSENT, AND THEY LIKE IT. A YEAR AGO, ARNULFO'S HOMECOMING CROWD WOULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN MUCH SMALLER BECAUSE MANY PEOPLE WOULD HAVE BEEN AFRAID TO SHOW THEIR COLORS, BUT THIS

YEAR THE PANAMENISTA FLAG WAS FLAUNTED AS A BADGE OF  
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POLITICAL MACHISMO. THIS SPIRIT OF FREEDOM IS A FAIRLY  
FRAGILE THING; AND GREATER REPRESSION IS DEFINITELY A  
POSSIBILITY IF TORRIJOS OR THE NATIONAL GUARD SHOULD FEEL  
THREATENED. BUT IT WOULD NOT BE EASY TO SQUELCH IT.

9. A THIRD ELEMENT OF CHANGE IN THE POLITICAL SCENE HAS  
TAKEN PLACE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PANAMA. THE SHOOTING  
DEATHS OF TWO STUDENTS ON CAMPUS, THE CLOSING OF THE  
UNIVERSITY AND THE ENSUING DEBATE OVER WHAT TO DO ABOUT  
RADICAL GROUPS COULD EITHER WEAKEN TORRIJOS' ULTRA-LEFT  
OPPOSITION OR MAKE IT MORE DANGEROUS. IF THE ULTRAS ARE  
PROSCRIBED, THEY MIGHT BE DRIVEN UNDERGROUND -- EVEN TURN  
TO TERRORISM. OR THEY MIGHT PROVE TO BE HELPLESS WITHOUT  
THE GATHERING PLACE AND SANCTUARY OF THE UNIVERSITY.  
ALLOWING THEM TO CONTINUE TO OPERATE OPENLY HAS ITS  
DANGERS, TOO -- NOT LEAST OF WHICH COULD BE INCREASINGLY  
VIOLENT CONFRONTATION BETWEEN PRO- AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT  
STUDENTS. A NUMBER OF THE ULTRA LEADERS HAVE GONE INTO  
HIDING, ANTICIPATING THAT THEIR POSITION WITH THE  
GOVERNMENT IS ALREADY UNTENABLE.

10. IT IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT THE POTENTIAL FOR  
COOPERATION BETWEEN THE FAR LEFT AND OTHER ADAMANT  
OPPOSITIONISTS, SUCH AS THE PANAMENISTAS. ARIAS HAS SO  
FAR PREACHED NON-VIOLENCE, AND HIS MAIDEN SPEECH IN SANTA  
ANA PLAZA ON JUNE 10 WAS GRAPHICALLY ANTI-COMMUNIST. BUT,  
IF ARIAS' SUPPORTERS THOUGHT THEY SMELLED TORRIJOS' BLOOD,  
SOME OF THEM MIGHT JOIN HANDS, PERHAPS CLANDESTINELY,  
WITH THE FAR-OUT STUDENTS. (SOME PANAMANIAN BELIEVE THAT  
THE PANAMENISTAS WERE BEHIND THE STUDENT SHOOTINGS.)  
IN ANY EVENT, UNDER CONDITIONS OF HIGH PUBLIC EXCITEMENT,  
A STUDENT-ARNULFO ALLIANCE MIGHT BE VERY EFFECTIVE -- AND  
DESTABILIZING.

11. THE MOST OBVIOUS RECENT CHANGE IN THE PANAMANIAN  
SCENE IS PERHAPS THE FACT THAT THERE IS A NEW RELATIONSHIP

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WITH THE U.S. TORRIJOS APPEARS TO REALIZE THAT HIS INTERESTS LIE IN A SMOOTHLY FUNCTIONING TREATY AND THAT THIS MEANS COOPERATION, NOT CONFRONTATION. TO ADJUST TO A NEW SITUATION IN WHICH HE MUST WORK IN TANDEM WITH THE ERSTWHILE SCAPEGOAT MAY NOT ALWAYS BE EASY. THE SCAPEGOAT WAS AT TIMES POLITICALLY USEFUL. PANAMA'S PRECARIOUS ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL SITUATION PROVIDES ANOTHER MOTIVE FOR TORRIJOS TO SEEK GOOD RELATIONS WITH BOTH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE FOREIGN PRIVATE SECTOR. WHILE THE TREATY MAY KEEP THE WOLF AWAY FROM PANAMA'S DOOR, IT DOES NOT REDUCE PANAMA'S DEPENDENCE ON THE U.S. (A SIDE EFFECT OF ACHIEVING A TREATY MAY BE INCREASING PRESSURE FROM LATIN AMERICAN LIBERALS -- ESPECIALLY VENEZUELA -- FOR FURTHER LIBERALIZATION.)

12. THE TREATY HAS ITS POSITIVE SIDE POLITICALLY, OF COURSE. WITH ALL ITS WARTS, IT IS THE PREMIER ACHIEVEMENT OF PANAMA'S HISTORY SINCE THE OPENING OF THE CANAL. IN ADDITION, THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT HAS A GOOD MANY OTHER FACTORS GOING FOR IT. MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE NATIONAL GUARD IS -- AS FAR AS WE KNOW -- AS FIRMLY BEHIND TORRIJOS AS EVER. THE INCREASED STRENGTH OF THE OPPOSITION MIGHT BE EXPECTED TO ENHANCE THE POSSIBILITY OF A SPLIT IN THE  
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GUARD; BUT THE FACT THAT ARNULFO ARIAS IS WARMLY DETESTED BY MOST OF THE GUARD BRASS PROBABLY REDUCES THE LIKELIHOOD OF A SPLIT. TORRIJOS' PERSONAL FOLLOWING IS

UNQUESTIONABLY NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE. EVEN SO, HE HAS AN UNDESCRIBABLE POLITICAL QUALITY WHICH CAUSES MANY PANAMANIAN TO FEEL REPRESENTED IN HIM. IF THE ECONOMY SHOULD NOW TURN UP, AS SOME PANAMANIAN ECONOMISTS BELIEVE IT IS ABOUT TO DO, THEN HIS POLITICAL VULNERABILITY WOULD BE FURTHER REDUCED.

13. AT THE VERY TIME HE IS MOST OFEERHFOTACK, TORRIJOSJR CB SEEMING TO ENHANCE YUS REGIME'S LEGITIMACY. HE HAS PROMISED TO GIVE GREATER LEGISLATIVE POWERS TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. AND THOUGH THE FULL WEIGHT OF INCUMBENCY IS ALREADY BEING FELT AS THE GOVERNMENT ENSURES THAT THE AUGUST ELECTIONS COME OUT RIGHT, THOSE ELECTIONS WILL ALMOST SURELY BE CLEAN AS FAR AS THE VOTE AND COUNT ARE CONCERNED. AS HE CONSIDERS THE OPTIONS OF HOW HE WILL RUN THE COUNTRY, TORRIJOS IS BEING PULLED IN VARIOUS DIRECTIONS. SOME WANT HIM TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION TO PERMIT HIMSELF TO CONTINUE THE JERRY-BUILT SYSTEM WHEREBY THERE IS A CEREMONIAL PRESIDENT BUT (TO QUOTE THE CONSTITUTION) "BRIGADIER GENERAL OMAR TORRIJOS HERRERA, COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL GUARD, IS RECOGNIZED AS MAXIMUM

LEADER OF THE PANAMANIAN REVOLUTION" WITH FULL EXECUTIVE POWERS. TORRIJOS IS ALSO SAID TO BE CONSIDERING RELINQUISHING CIVIL OFFICE IN FAVOR OF RUNNING THINGS FROM HIS OFFICE OF GUARD COMMANDER. BUT INCREASINGLY THE ODDS SEEM TO FAVOR TORRIJOS' BEING ELECTED PRESIDENT WITH FULL POWERS, BY THE ASSEMBLY IN OCTOBER. IF HE SHOULD DO SO, HIS JURIDICAL POSITION WOULD BE SOMEWHAT LESS VULNERABLE  
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TO CRITICS.

14. REGARDLESS OF WHAT COURSE TORRIJOS DECIDES TO TAKE THIS FALL, WE EXPECT HIM TO REMAIN IN A POSITION TO CALL THE SHOTS. TORRIJOS, THEN, FACES NEW POLITICAL PROBLEMS OVER THE NEXT YEAR OR TWO. THOUGH WE ARE UNABLE TO ACCURATELY GAUGE HOW THREATENING THOSE PROBLEMS MAY BE, HE APPEARS TO BE STRONG ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THEM. WE ARE LESS CERTAIN, HOWEVER, WHETHER HE CAN DO SO WITHOUT CREATING NEW PROBLEMS. FOR EXAMPLE, WE MENTIONED THE UNCERTAINTIES IN THE UNIVERSITY. ANOTHER PROBLEM AREA COULD BE IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS AREA. SERIOUS POLITICAL PROBLEMS -- WHETHER FROM THE PARTIES OR THE STUDENTS OR ELSEWHERE -- MIGHT LEAD TO A CRACKDOWN INVOLVING VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS. THE IMPLICATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS, BOTH FOR PANAMA AND FOR OUR TREATY RELATIONSHIP, COULD BE SERIOUS. AS FOR WHETHER OR NOT THE TREATIES GAVE PANAMA TORRIJOS IN PERPETUITY, WE WILL QUOTE AN APHORISM THE PANAMANIAN USED TO EMPLOY WHEN

TALKING ABOUT THE 1903 TREATY: "FOREVER IS A LONG TIME".

JORDEN

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## Message Attributes

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